



Department of Justice

STATEMENT OF

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

BEFORE THE

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM,
AND HOMELAND SECURITY**

HEARING ENTITLED

“YOUTH VIOLENCE: TRENDS, MYTHS AND SOLUTIONS”

HELD

FEBRUARY 11, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Gohmert, and Members of the Subcommittee, the Department of Justice appreciates the opportunity to submit a statement for the record for the hearing on “Youth Violence: Trends, Myths and Solutions.”

My name is Laurie Robinson, and I serve as the Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs (OJP), a component of the Department of Justice, having taken a leave of absence from my post as Director of the University of Pennsylvania Criminology Department’s Master of Science Program. I am taking on a role that I played for seven years under President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno. I agreed to do so because the issues that OJP deals with are so critical, and I wanted to do my part to help Attorney General Eric Holder during an unprecedented time in our Nation’s history.

As you are aware Mr. Chairman, OJP’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated delinquency prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system. OJJDP strives to protect public safety, hold offenders accountable, and provide treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juvenile and their families.

I would like to take this opportunity to focus on statistical trends, and highlight some areas of major concern, including minority arrest rates, youth gang violence, and female arrest rates. I would also like to take this opportunity to discuss ways in which we encourage evidence-based programs and strategies. I know the Subcommittee supports these efforts, and we look forward to continuing to work together to improve the juvenile justice system.

Mr. Chairman, in general, trends show that juvenile violent crime is down in the United States. Juvenile violent crime arrests grew dramatically between the late 1980s and 1994, when they peaked, and then fell sharply for the ten years that followed. Nevertheless, there remain causes for concern.

Although violent crime arrests have dropped substantially, arrest trends for simple assault and drug law violations continue to be similar to the rates found in the 1990s, with little or no decline.¹ Moreover, while the national trend for youth violent crime arrests has dropped and continues to do so, that is not the case for every community or every sector of the youth population.

The disproportionate rate of arrests between minority and white youth for violent and other crimes continues to be alarming. While the disparity between black and white juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes declined modestly between 1980 and 2007, this improvement is only slightly encouraging. In 1980, the black juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes was 6.3 times the white rate; by 2007, this disparity had declined to 5 times the rate for white juveniles.² Given the significant decrease in juvenile arrests for violent crime during this period, however, this improvement is inadequate.

Another area that warrants continued attention is youth who are involved in gangs. Recent data from the OJJDP-funded National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) indicates that youth gang problems persist in many communities. In the 2007 NYGS, law enforcement agencies in most communities, from our larger cities to rural counties,

¹ Internet Citation: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Online. Available: http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05211. October 24, 2008. Adapted from Puzzanhera, C. **Juvenile Arrests 2007** [Forthcoming]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

²Internet Citation: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Online. Available: http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05261. October 24, 2008.

reported that they were experiencing youth gang problems. It is estimated that 788,000 gang members and 27,000 gangs were active in the United States in 2007, with one in five larger cities reporting an increase in gang homicides compared with 2006, and two in five reporting an increase in other violent offenses by gang members.³

Another area of concern involves the high number of girls who enter the juvenile justice system. Trends indicate the female proportion of juvenile arrests has increased (or failed to decrease) since the 1990s, differing sharply from trends for male juveniles.

Between 1987 and 1994, aggravated assault arrest rates for both male and female juveniles rose substantially and then fell through 2007. The female rate, however, rose more (114% vs. 72%) and then fell less (27% vs. 44%) than the male rate. Accordingly, the 2007 male juvenile arrest rate was just 8% above its 1980 level, while the female rate was 83% above its 1980 level.⁴ Despite the finding by OJJDP's Girls Study Group that this increase in girls' arrests does not reflect an actual increase in violent behavior among girls,⁵ the fact is that they continue to flow into an already overburdened juvenile justice system. As these trends indicate, it is clear that not all of our nation's youth are reflected in the overall decrease in youth violence. This is not the time for us to stand aside.

³ Egley, A., Jr. and O'Donnell, C.E. **Highlights of the 2007 National Youth Gang Survey** [Forthcoming]. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁴ Internet Citation: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Online. Available: http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05235. October 24, 2008. Adapted from Puzanchera, C. **Juvenile Arrests 2007** [Forthcoming]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention..

⁵ Strom, K., T. Warner, L. Tichavsky, and M. Zahn (In development). **Policing daughters: The role of domestic violence arrest policies in child-parent conflicts**. This finding is cited in Zahn, M., Hawkins, S., Chiancone, J. and Whitworth, A. **The Girls Study Group: Charting the Way to Delinquency Prevention for Girls**. [2008]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention..

In his inauguration speech, President Barack Obama stressed the importance of “restor[ing] science to its rightful place.” We are committed to enhancing our efforts to assist states and communities to identify and implement evidence-based strategies to prevent at-risk behaviors, intervene with juvenile offenders, and rehabilitate delinquent youth.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your continued support of such programs. Implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention programs is the best investment we can make to positively impact our children and families. And analyzing trends in juvenile delinquency, such as those I have cited, enables communities and juvenile justice practitioners to better develop and target evidence-based programming.

OJJDP’s authorizing legislation, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002, requires state agencies receiving juvenile justice formula grant funds, whenever possible, to prioritize funding to programs and activities based on “rigorous, systematic, and objective research that is scientifically based.” We will continue to work with the field to support social science research and evaluation to identify the most effective and promising programs and strategies to combat juvenile delinquency and reduce risk factors for youth and to ensure that such programs are accessible to states and communities.

To these ends, OJJDP developed its Model Programs Guide (MPG), an online tool designed to assist communities and practitioners to identify programs and strategies that have the most promise in addressing the needs of youth and reducing risk factors and offending behavior. MPG is an online portal to scientifically tested and proven programs that address a range of issues across the juvenile justice spectrum. MPG can be used to

assist juvenile justice practitioners, administrators, and researchers to enhance accountability, ensure public safety, and reduce recidivism. It profiles and rates the effectiveness of more than 175 prevention and intervention programs and helps communities identify those that best suit their needs. Users can search the MPG's database by program category, target population, risk and protective factors, effectiveness rating, and other parameters. OJJDP has also incorporated language in all its grant solicitations encouraging applicants to institute evidence-based programs and practices.

Research indicates that a balanced approach that incorporates prevention, intervention, and suppression, through multi-agency collaboration, is the most effective strategy for youth gang prevention and reduction. OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model incorporates these strategies and provides guidelines for implementation in its recently published report *Best Practices to Address Community Gang Problems*. OJJDP has also developed tools which communities can use to assist them in assessing their gang problem and implementing a community-wide strategy that is tailored to their needs.

While we know a fair amount about what works – and what doesn't – in preventing and reducing juvenile crime, we still face serious challenges. One example is programs that target girls' delinquency. The OJJDP Girls Study Group identified and reviewed dozens of programs in use that focus on girls' delinquency. However, few of these programs have been evaluated with the rigor required to determine their effectiveness. While none of the programs reviewed were identified as "ineffective," at best, the results were inconclusive. In moving forward, we hope to be able to support further evaluation of girls' delinquency programs to improve and expand the pool of

available evidence-based strategies for community use. A similar approach should be undertaken to address the continuing high rates of arrests for minority youth.

We need to continue to build and enhance programming that we know works. Indeed, given our current economic climate, it is more critical than ever to stop funding programs that do not work. We must work together to ensure that taxpayers' dollars are invested in research to analyze programs that have shown promise and in implementation of evidence-based programs that have been proven to work.

In closing, I thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to provide the perspective of the Department of Justice. We are committed to continuing to work with our federal, state, and local partners to address youth violence and other forms of delinquency. This concludes my statement Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to submit my statement for the record.